DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 493 EC 180 229

AUTHOR Stevens, Suzanne H.
TITLE Differences to Celebrate.
PUB DATE Feb 85
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the International Conference of the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT ACLD Newsbrief; n160 May-Jun 1985

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cerebral Dominance; Classroom Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; *Learning Disabilities; Student Characteristics; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A teacher of learning disabled (LD) students reviews characteristics associated with right brain functioning and notes the ways in which LD students may exhibit such skills, often to the dismay of teachers interested in classroom order. Examples cited are children with unique spatial abilities, with needs to relate to concrete experience, with autistic temperaments and extreme sensitivity, with an expanded focus of attention, and with caretaker qualities. The beneficial side of each of these qualities is suggested and brief management suggestions are offered. (CL)

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Suzanne H. Stevens

Differences to Celebrate

Saturday General Session

For years, they have been telling us that the learning disabled child is a right-brained child, and ever since split brain research came out, we've been reading and reading and reading about little neurons and little endings and little wirings in the brain and so forth, but nobody seems to have done very much about translating this into the reality where it affects us in our classrooms with these kids. So I want to tell you what happened to me when I first came across the split brain theory, and I saw the chart that had the two sides of the brain explained, with a list of about 15 very exotic functions for the left brain.

And then the list of right brain characteristics and I thought, "Well, gee, I don't know much about those. It looks like the fun side of a person."

The first time that I saw the list of left and right brain characteristics, I was actively teaching in a classroom

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at a clinic. And I was struck by the similarity between those two lists and what I had perceived through the years as patterns of strengths and weaknesses in my students. No one, as far as I knew at that time, had made this connection. It was one of those "ah hahs!" I thought I was really onto something revolutionary.

It was several years before I found out that others in the field of learning disabilities were pursuing the same thought and doing investigation and research along the same paths.

I read a marvelous book this past summer called *Cradles of Eminence* by a couple named Gertzel and Gertzel. It was a study that they made of famous people. Their research method is marvelous. They went to a library somewhere in New Jersey to the biography section. And they said, "This is a good library and anybody that has made it into this biography section we can agree upon, then, is considered to be successful and famous." They took the biography section and did extensive studies on each of the people written about, and they found several things that were truly intriguing.

First of all, as children, 80% of these successful people who were subjects of these biographies showed unusual talent either intellectually or creatively. The second tidbit that was even more intriguing was that 60% reported having intensely disliked school. Most of them were quite unsuccessful in terms of the academic success that we, as teachers, impose upon them. When their teachers wre interviewd after these various famous people had achieved their prominence, most of them were not remembered by their teachers. The interviewer would say, "You had this kid when he was in the 4th grade," And they would say, "I did? I don't remember him." If this adult was remembered as a child, it was usually in a negative way. He was that "oddball." He was that "weird one." He was "the one that drove me crazy."

So Gertzel and Gertzel came to a conclusion — which I think is a pretty heavy condemnation of us as teachers — that teachers, in general, prefer to have students who are highly gifted intellectually and low on creativity. No wonder the LD kid is not very popular among the general population of teachers.

Another thing about the Gertzel and Gertzel book that was intriguing (and the reason that I bring it up at all) is that most of these people who are famous have achieved their fame in some area that we would consider to be a right-brain talent or skill. There were not a whole lot of world championship spellers. I don't believe there was a single A-#1 best ever organized secretary.

So that as a culture, as a people, apparently we value the potential that can be developed in a right-brained person. And that is what we are going to explore this morning.

We are going to talk about several areas of potential that you see in your classroom in these children. But the chances are, you don't seen it in a good light nor think of it as something wonderful. And I don't want to imply that I do either. I'm just like you — in the middle of February when spring break looks forever away, I don't see a whole lot of good things that I might have seen back in mid-September.

The first talent that I associate with right brain is a visual spatial gift. Now, of course, we have all heard about this. We know that this kid can imagine. He can see in his mind. He is a dreamer. He has this creativity, and these pictures and images just happen to him naturally and spontaneously. It's part of the way he's made. We don't do much celebrating about this. In fact, we find it to be quite inconvenient. A child who can see with his mind's eye and who can sit in a classroom and dream, is not likely to be dreaming about the spelling words, the math assignment, whatever it is that you have sat up all night preparing for him.

Very often, we have no notion of what this kid is dreaming about, so that we have no way of tuning into the fact that even though it is inconvenient, there is the potential that this child can be developing something wonderful right here in the classroom. All we notice is that they sort of "space out." That blank look, nobody home, and they can ostensibly be looking at anything. They might be looking out the window or at the blackboard. But it's very noticeable that they are inwardly looking somewhere else.

I had a small self-contained LD class of 10-13-year-olds. It was very intense and I was it. The music teacher even quit. Nobody could handle these kids. So I did P.E. and art, and we got there at eight and we stayed there until three. There are those of you here who know exactly what I am talking about.

You get to be pretty tight when you've got a class like that. These kids will confess and talk about and admit to things that perhaps you wouldn't have a chance to find out about if you had a larger class where there is more anonymity. For instance, I had one little boy, Ronnie Lee, who was beautiful. He was, I guess, 11 or 12, and the kid was a mechanical genius. He could do anything as long as it had to do with machines and pulleys and ropes and engines and so forth. He was one of those children that I seriously doubted would ever become literate, no matter who taught him, and no matter how well the instruction was carried out. And I'm not sure how far he got. He got further than I expected, but in terms of his learning disabilities, this kid was a basket case. And when he spaced out in class, because I knew him, because we had this close relationship, I knew where he was. I knew what world he had moved into. He had moved into a world of gears and parts and machines and levers and pulleys and things that ground and whirled and made motions, and occasionally he would share a little of that world with me. For instance, one great event in his life was uncelebrated except by me and his family. He had an old Volkswagen engine that somehow he had come across. I guess it sat up on cinder blocks in his basement. And this was his toy; this is what he was taking apart. He was determined that he was going to rebuild that engine, and it would run again and he would be a great hero.

Every once in a while I would catch a little something about how things were going at home with the engine. Then we went through a period when he spaced out for days, and it was much more noticeable than usual. After two or three days of watching this boy just drift, it slipped out what it was that he had been pondering, and the solution that had come to him that I thought was nothing short of genius. He has some kind of a part that had something or other to do with bearings. A few of you men probably know what that means . . . I'm not too sure. But there was a round something or other and things that fit inside of it. Somehow, this boy managed to get these things out of it. And buy new ones. But then he found that he couldn't get the new ones back in because they were machined to fit so closely and tightly. So he did some research and hung out at all the different gas stations around town and finally had to go over to the Volkswagen shop and pester them to find out "How do you get these back into this?" And they said, "Oh, there's nothing to it. See, we've got this machine. Come on back here and we'll show you." And they showed him this wonderful $1500 machine where you put in these things, and it does it all for you by

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pressure and leverage and so forth. And he said, "Can I use your machine? And they said 'No." So he sat in my class spacing out and pondering for days, and one morning he came in with this light in his eyes and he said "I got it!" Well, I wasn't sure what "it" was, but I figured it was what he had been thinking about. He had heard somewhere about the fact that cold makes things contract. And he had taken the parts that had to go into it and put them into the freezer. Then he had taken the big parts that had to be the receptacles and somehow got them into the oven. He had a very fine mother. The woman was an absolute saint. And with a pair of tongs and gloves to handle the hot and the cold, it was the old story of how you put the rim on a wagon wheel. You use the contraction and the expansion.

Now, of course, he didn't learn a whole lot of spelling during that two-week period unless I went over and kind of nudged him and said, "Please come back to where we are." But this is where their minds are. And you have to try to meet them there somehow. Climb on into that world of theirs and get a hold of them. And maybe you can drag them out. And if you can't drag them out, you'll have to take what you have to offer and take it on in there where they are.

The second gift that they have is one that we find terribly inconvenient — they have this reality orientation which means that they relate to the concrete — touch it, feel it, respond to it with their senses — reality. Since this is the world that they live in, where they touch, see, smell, taste and so forth, it means that they get into everything.

Which makes them not always terribly fun to have around, but it makes teaching them an adventure. I was working in a Christian school in Chicago last fall, and I told the teachers there about this reality orientation, and they all sat there and nodded their heads as we talked about the various things that give evidence to this, and then I realized that they felt that they had an advantage in this area. And I wanted them to understand that they didn't. In Christian schools you know, they pray. That's okay. And I would assume that if things get really hectic, you might even stop a class with "Wait a minute, I need to go over here and have a word and get myself back together." I explained to them that they mustn't be convinced that they are the only ones who pray about their children. All of us do that.

It's the first week in March. The science notebook has been due for four days. It has probably rained or snowed for at least six weks. You have a child at home with the flu. You've had school right up to here, and as you walk into that classroom and put that key in the door at 10 minutes to eight, you're praying, "Dear God, please let that kid be absent." You've done it. All teachers have done it. That's prayer. And, occasionally, your prayers are answered, although I'm sure you've noticed these are the healthiest kids in the world! They may not get another award in their whole life, but perfect attendance year after year because their mother doesn't want them home either.

This reality orientation that somehow comes out in the form of a kid who experiences everything directly and who, therefore, gets into everything, can be thought of in the analogy of a string of Christmas lights. Think of the LD child as similar to one of those old-fashioned strings of Christmas lights. If one bulb is out, you've had it — they're all out. And that's how this child works.

Either you have him completely involved or you haven't got his attention at all. He cannot pay attention, or perhaps it's will not, but he doesn't pay attention with just his eyes and his pencil like the other kids. He has to have his whole body, including body English, involved.

If you can't capture that type of involvement with the subject matter that you have in mind for his focus of attention, then he will find something else and become involved in that. Or, he'll take what you have provided him and sort of adjust it, so that he can approach it in his preferred, reality-oriented way.

For instance, you have stayed up all night preparing some gorgeous reading worksheets. You've handed them out. You've given the instructions. And he is not very apt to find all of this abstract, narrow focus to his liking, so he's going to take that sheet that you're so proud of and think is going to capture his attention, and he's going to translate it into a reality-oriented activity. How does he do that?

Well, he could take a pencil and punch holes in it. He could draw on it. He could fold it into almost anthing and probably make a pretty good airplane. It would even make good raw material for spit wads. But the point is, he wants to relate to this with his whole body, his whole system. That's how his attention works.

And if you want to capture that attention, you need to take that into consideration and find ways that he can do that and be focusing on what you have in mind.

Number three: the right brain, as we all know, is the seat of the feelings and the emotions. And I'm sure you've noticed that the LD child has what you would call an artistic temperament. He tends a little bit toward flashy. He doesn't say, "I'm getting angry." He acts it out for you in a much clearer way. If he is joyous, sad, whatever the emotion that is playing on his little heart strings, he's going to interpret it for you out here in reality, so that you get to deal with the living emotion.

These kids are very sensitive. They tend to be quite impractical. People who are highly emotional don't necessarily think first. They have their hearts on their sleeves and that leads them, so they have a natural tendency to be rescuers. If you've got a lot of rescuers in your class, they cannot resist a hurt puppy or an underdog, any underdog.

In that self-contained class that I mentioned earlier, my guys were constantly getting into serious difficulty because of this unquenchable urge to go to the rescue of an underdog. And the most marvelous example was one morning. I didn't have a class. It was twenty after eight, and there was nobody. I mean, I had 13 kids at this point, and that's quite a hefty absence rate. And the intercom came on and said, "Ms. Stevens, may I see you in the office?" And it was the principal. I said, "Yes, sir," and I went to the office wondering what's going on. Maybe the kids had been on a bus and the bus had gone into a ditch. Well, it might have been simpler if that had been it.

It seems that the special ed bus in which my 13 kids were riding, with all the other special ed types from the county, had one child on it that their hearts went out to. This was a little boy that I knew. He was autistic. Autistic kids are so fragile, so vulnerable. They cannot defend themselves physically or verbally. And then we send them out there, "Get on that bus, kid, and go to school and cope."

Well, somehow a bunch of kids on the bus started picking on the little autistic boy. Apparently, they were rather large children. My students were 10-13 and I understand that these were high school kids — big high school kids. I don't know exactly what they were doing. But they were picking on this little autistic child.

And my boys got a little bent. Of course, it just takes one to get bent and the rest will jump right in. My 13 guys took on the bus. And they took 'em apart. They won. There were bloody noses and blackened eyes, and, apparently, the fur really flew. So that when I got to the principal's office, here were my 13, and they looked like the winners. They weren't too beat up. And

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they did not look shame-faced. They looked proud. And I know that if the chance came, they would do it again. In fact, this was six or eight years ago, and I know they're still acting this way. This is their nature. This leading from the heart, whether it's practical or not, whether "I'm going to get into trouble" or not, whether "I'll have to walk eight miles to get to school" — none of this matters if there is something out here that needs to be done by a "good guy" like me.

And they think of themselves as the good guys. Maybe it's that they feel they have so little to lose that they can afford to take those risks and go ahead and be conspicuous and make a scene. But, boy, when they get into that rescuer mode, they do make a scene!

Number four: the LD kid (and the right-brained person) tends to function on what we call an expanded focus of attention. They see the world through a wide-angle lens. They notice everything. Now we in the classroom tend to call this "short attention span" or "distractibility." Sometimes we even consider this as part of hyperactivity. We definitely consider this tremendously inconvenient.

This kid functions almost all of the time on this wide-angle lens approach to reality. He does not tune out anything. He just lets it all come in. Now, there are those who tell us that he has no choice, that that's the only way he can function. I remember one kid who ran in one day and said, "I forgot to take my Ritalin" and I said "You better act like you took it."

After you've been in that classroom three to four months beyond September the first, it's really hard to stay in touch with the fact that he can't control that behavior. "Just this one day, make an exception, will ya, and control it?"

They notice everything, and because of this onslaught of sense data coming into them, they are responding to all kinds of things around them, many of which you wish they would just ignore and most of which makes your life, again, inconvenient.

The first time I discovered anything much about this wide-angle lens idea, I was riding for the first time in my life on the L.A. freeway with my daughter at the wheel. There were eight lanes on my side, and I was just aghast. And I commented to her about what a great driver she is. "I feel perfectly safe and comfortable, but thank God, I'm not driving. How do you do it?" And she said, "Oh, Mom, it's a breeze, there's nothing to it. There's a trick. You just unfocus your eyes." I had a sudden wave of panic. But what she was describing was shifting into that wide-angle lens approach to reality, where you take in everything. All of us have the ability to do this. It's what keeps us safe. You cannot play a really hot game of tennis and be thinking that the racquet may not hit the ball squarely. You just can't move that way. Anytime you have to act quickly and spontaneously, you must move into that right brain. So all of us have experienced this.

Number five: If you combine this visual-spatial gift or the dreamer-creator kind of thing that we talked about earlier with the fact that you have somebody who is very reality oriented and deals with concrete reality, plus the fact that he has all these feelings and emotions that he's leading from, plus this expanded focus that makes him notice everything, you end up with a person who is ruled by his sense of emotions, a person who is extremely sensitive. You've certainly noticed this in your children — highly idealistic dreamers, creators, creative persons, creative problem-solvers.

And all of this can come together in a trait that I call "the caretaker." They have a natural tendency to see and notice and relate to and respond in a very appreciative, loving way.

Very often the things that they see beauty in are things that we don't find particularly beautiful or even acceptable. It took me years to understand that, yes, snakes are lovely. Thank God, I never had a kid who was interested in spiders. I never would have gotten through that one!

While these kids are in our classrooms, we notice that they are the ones who volunteer, "Let me take care of gerbils." They are the ones that say, "Hey, I'll be the one who'll be responsible for the blackboards." But we don't often let them do it, do we? If you give him that pail and sponge and send him out for water, the minute he hits the door, he steps into that time warp, and you may never see him again. The bus will be gone, and you'll be stuck with this kid, and he lives on the other side of town. You can't take those risks. So we very often have to just simply ignore this great urge to be a caretaker because it's not practical for our purposes in the classroom.

And then, even beyond this caretaker quality, we sometimes have that man among men, the ultimate, the pinnacle of what we think of as the height of mature fruition of human potential, the sage — the person who has started out with that dreaming, that vision, those new ideas, and has taken them and brought them closer to reality by sharing them with us, so that we, too, can catch ahold of the new vision and a new dream.

Dr. Martin Luther King was definitely such a man. With his dream and his vision, he changed our reality that exists today. He could see something that was possible, that had not occurred to a whole lot of other people at that time. And, somehow, he found the power to put some life into that dream and present it in a convincing way so that he could lead other people to the blossoming and the reality. And, of course, it's still building.

But these are the children that we're dealing with, who populate our classrooms. We've got kids with ideas, and they're new ideas. The ideas don't have a lot to do with the things we would like them to be thinking about. But as Gertzel and Gertzel pointed out, these children have a different calling. They are being led in a direction that is not the same direction that applies to that other 90 percent.

And it's not right or fair for us to deny them the pursuit of what they seem to be cut out for and designed to do.

In trying to see the other side of these children, what we really need to do is learn to see the other side of ourselves. Approximately one out of every 10 children is learning disabled. Although they are not mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, or physically handicapped, these children fail to learn to read and write and spell when taught in a regular classroom with standard classroom methods.

As a result of their failure in school, parents, teachers, classmates and friends accuse them of being stupid, and lazy. The learning failure is bad enough. But constant criticism and ridicule cause really serious damage. They kill the child's feeling of self-worth, so that he grows up angry, guilty, and lacking in self-confidence.

Help stop this vicious circle of failure and frustration that damages 10% of our children needlessly. The learning disabled child's worse enemy is the ignorant adult.

Suzanne H. Stevens, 134 Shady Blvd., Winston-Salem, NC 27101, is the author of The Learning Disabled Child: Ways that Parents Can Help *and* Classroom Success for the Learning Disabled.

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